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ABSTRACT

Small public libraries can deliver service like big libraries, without sacrificing hometown warmth and charm. By borrowing strategies used by successful small businesses in the private sector, defining goals and exploiting low cost technologies, small public libraries can serve customer wants as well as much larger institutions. Responding to just three strategic questions, any small library can improve customer service, make better use of available resources and open up new service opportunities, without a bigger building, budget or book collection. Each of these questions is discussed in the digest: What business are you in? What do your customers want? How do you get it for them? By focusing efforts strategically on well-defined customer preferences, buying, getting and borrowing strategically, and defining the mission realistically, small public libraries can be "big" in customer service and satisfaction. (AEF)

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By: Norm Parry

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Small Public Libraries Can Serve Big

By Norm Parry

Small public libraries can deliver service like big libraries, without sacrificing hometown warmth and charm. By borrowing strategies used by successful small businesses in the private sector, defining goals and exploiting ubiquitous low cost technologies, small public libraries can serve customer wants as well as much larger institutions. Responding to just three strategic questions, any small library can improve customer service, make better use of available resources and open up new service opportunities, without a bigger building, budget or book collection:

- What business are you in?
- What do your customers want?
- How do you get it for them?

What Business Are You in?

One of the most telling questions any organization can ask is "What is our business?" The follow up question, equally important, is "What is none of our business?"

"We're in the library business, of course," is no more useful strategically than the caterer who says, "I'm in the food business." It helps not at all to go to the dictionary and look up "library"; *your* library will not be described there. You have no choice but to answer your own question, beginning with "this library," not "a library" or "the library" or (worse) "Libraries." The platonic ideal "library" exists nowhere outside the student carrels of library science graduate schools.

You should ask, like a journalist, who, what, where, why and how.

- Who will *this* library serve?
- What do they want?
- Where will we get it for them?
- Why should we, rather than some other agency, provide this service?
- How will we provide what the patron wants?

The answers to these questions will tell you what your business is, and provide you with a first draft of your revised library mission statement.

Then what is none of your business? Everything and anything else. Face it; you can't be all libraries to all people. The good news is if you aren't trying to be everything, you can be the very thing your small community wants in a public library. You may have to abandon some of your most heartfelt beliefs and assumptions about what a library *should* be, and what people *should* want from a library; but increased customer satisfaction and increased circulation will soon replace any sense of loss you may suffer. It's not what you aren't that matters, it's what you *are*.

Defining what your library is and isn't allows you to focus your resources on the services most important to most of your customers and on developing connections to those specialized services your customers may occasionally require. For the physics undergraduate home for the holidays who asks you for the latest information on quantum mechanics, you phone your contact at the university library and say, "I'm sending a friend of ours over to you; we don't do quarks." Nobody will expect you to be a college research library, unless you do. To the physics undergraduate home for the holidays who says, "I'm tired of all these quarks and muons; give me something light," you say, "Ah, we've got just the book for you." You have "something light" because that's one of your specialties, isn't it?

Give Them What They Want

What do you call a business that doesn't give its customers what they want, when and where and why-ever they want it? An *out of* business. If you have defined your library mission as something *other* than *everything*, what are you left to do? Find out what your customers want, and give it to them. Be extremely suspicious of words like "need" and "should" and "ought" with respect to patron borrowing. It's none of your business what they should, or ought, or need to read. Your business is giving them what they want. You have no more business deciding for your customers what they will read than the most militant censor has. Your job is to sense what they want, not censor what they get.

Unlike many larger public libraries, small public libraries often have the advantage of maintaining a close day-to-day relationship with customers. The librarian hears what they want not only at the library, but also during chance meetings at the market, at the Founders' Day picnic, anywhere people stop to talk. That helps, but it is not enough. Anecdotal information can be as misleading in a small town as anywhere else.

Do the Math

Small libraries must use the same tools of analysis that big libraries and successful businesses use. Hard numbers are needed to support decision-making on acquisitions, programming, display space priorities and other library management functions. Your numbers may be smaller, but they are no less significant. Fortunately, the computing tools needed to compile and analyze information about circulation, traffic, preferences and costs are readily available and affordable in off-the-shelf hardware and software.

For a small library to serve its customers as well as a bigger library, careful attention must be paid to actual library-use behavior. What percent of your lending is fiction, non-fiction, videos, children's books? How many people visit the library each day? How many items do they borrow per visit? What days and hours do they visit most often? Measure what they do, not what they should or might or ought to do.

Because a small public library has far less ammunition to spend hitting its targets, the small library must aim better. The rifle, not

the shotgun, is the collection development analog of choice for the smaller library. Good, reliable, up-to-date materials-use intelligence is the small library's best defense against collection obsolescence and acquisitions waste.

If you're spending eighty percent of your acquisitions budget on materials that account for twenty percent of your circulation, you're doing your patrons no more good than the Ma and Pa grocery with half its inventory tied up in canned artichokes. You can lead Rozinante to the library, but you can't make him read *Don Quixote*.

Get It for Them Just in Time

Once you've decided not to be everything, you can become the very thing your community really wants from its small public library. You must:

- weed ruthlessly
- scrounge shamelessly
- borrow strategically.

Most librarians hate weeding their collections. Once acquired, books become members of the library family; they're as hard to get rid of as the uncle who came to visit for a weekend and stayed for a year. Unloved, unused, unwanted by your customers, there's something about an unread book that makes it as hard to part with as the pet cat you've grown allergic to. Besides evoking your pity, a book unwanted by *your* library customers is prima facie evidence of your failure to correctly judge patron wants, even if it was a bestseller in bookstores and a most-read title in some other library. And don't you know that book you weeded last week because no one has borrowed it for five years will be Oprah's pick next month?

Here you must follow the example of the farmer. If you don't weed frequently and well, the "good" will be choked out by the "bad." Don't let your library collection lie fallow on the shelves. If it's virtually dying on the vine, harvest it and give it to some other library where it may be more to the customers' tastes. Again, witness the farmer: books, like livestock, are not pets. A book, like a beefsteak, is a consumable with a shelf life and an expiration date: "After X years, discard unread item." It may hurt like the dickens, and it may make you feel like Scrooge, but if you want to keep your collection fresh and active, weed often, weed deep.

If your budget is small and your needs are big—beg, borrow, and scrounge. Successful small businesses don't pay full price; why should you? Use the classic "assuming close" known to all good salespeople: "Would you like to donate that today, or will it be free?" Scour thrift stores and garage sales for books and videos, music, furniture and supplies. Go to auctions and bid low. Distain any video not marked "previously viewed." Fill in your "must have" classics Dewey numbers with inexpensive editions. Purchase materials through a library consortium, regional library system or large public library, where volume purchasing commands substantial discounts.

Whenever possible buy the collected or multi-book combos, instead of the individual titles. Use e-mail to establish a lively "gift and exchange" arrangement with other libraries. Never let personal pride get in your way when dealing for your library. "If it was just me, that would be an okay price, I guess, but it's for our little public library, and..." Think of yourself as the noble scavenger, the hunter-gatherer foraging for your culture-hungry library tribe.

Businesspeople call it "just-in-time" inventory; librarians call it "interlibrary loan." It is, without question, the single most powerful tool the small library can use to extend local library services. The use of interlibrary borrowing not only gives you and your patrons access to the enormous combined resources of many libraries, it allows you to dedicate your resources – money, shelf space, time – to your customers' most immediate requirements. If you can borrow it, you don't have to own it. You can spend your limited resources on the materials and services that your tightly-focused customer profile tells you will most benefit your customers.

You're in the business of loaning, not owning. Your goal is to get what your customers want. How you get it will determine whether you are a broker or broke. By concentrating your resources on those materials most in demand in your library and borrowing everything else, you can achieve a strategic marriage of having and holding made in heaven. By playing the game of books "just in time," you will score big in customer satisfaction and cost accounting.

"Do you have...?" "Yes, we do. I'll get it for you."

By focusing efforts strategically on well-defined customer preferences, buying, getting and borrowing strategically and defining your mission realistically, your small public library will be big in customer service and satisfaction. You can't be everything, but by concentrating on what your customers want most, you can really be *something*.

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About the Author

Norm Parry, MLS, is Director of the New Woodstock Free Library, a rural upstate New York public library chartered to serve a population of 900. In the six years under Parry's direction, library circulation has increased from 10,000 to 45,000. Parry is also an adjunct instructor of computer concepts at the Utica School of Commerce and owner of a small personnel-consulting business, Cyrano Ink.

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